

# The crane lady

Judith Mooncotch is not daunted by the fact that she is one of a handful of women in the crane rental business.

D. Ann Shiffler reports

**W**hen you walk into the offices of LaGrange Crane Service on the outskirts of Chicago you quickly realize that there's something special about this company. Lush tropical plants accent the tastefully appointed, atrium-styled lobby. The soothing sound of water trickling from a fountain can faintly be heard above the soft music emanating from the sound system. In various glass-walled offices that flank the lobby, well-behaved dogs lounge around happily, waiting for the opportunity to greet newcomers who walk through door.

While experiencing this pleasant scene in the front office, it's hard to imagine that the adjoining shop and yard house a fleet of some 40 powerful cranes, ranging in capacity from 30 to 250 tons, and which hang steel and pick and place heavy loads at jobsites throughout the Chicago-area each day.

For more than 25 years the company has garnered the respect of Illinois and Indiana contractors, all of whom know they can trust LaGrange to provide them with expert operators and modern, well-maintained cranes.

And they also know that at the helm of LaGrange Crane is not your average crane man. President Judith Mooncotch calls

the shots at the company that she and her husband started in 1981. She was a partner in the business until 1998, when she took over the top job, managing the people and purchasing the equipment needed to keep the business competitive.

"We work hard in this market to build and maintain our relationships with our customers," says the soft-spoken, yet gracefully confident Mooncotch. "It's a competitive market. We have bought several new cranes recently to satisfy market needs, to continue to tap our full market potential."

Most recently, Mooncotch directed the investment of more than \$5 million in new cranes, including a Grove GMK6250L, a 250-ton all terrain crane, now the largest unit in the LaGrange fleet. She also bought two 60-ton Grove GMK3055s, bringing to nine the number of Grove units purchased since 2003.

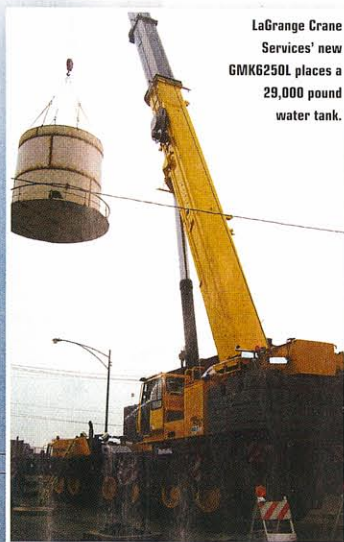
Mooncotch purchases her Grove units from Walter Payton Power Equipment, based in Riverdale, IL. "LaGrange Crane is a great company and Judith is great to work with," says Ken Martinek, crane specialist for Walter Payton Power Equipment. "Judith and her team are very knowledgeable about the market and in knowing what they need in terms of cranes."

## Top-notch people

The LaGrange fleet also includes several Terex units as well as Manitex boom trucks, although Mooncotch says she and her mechanic are partial to the Grove product in recent years. Keeping their cranes in top condition is a priority.

"My mechanic, he's a phenom, and I trust his knowledge to assure we get machines that are well built and won't fall apart," says Mooncotch.

Out in the immaculate shop, not a drop of oil



LaGrange Crane Services' new GMK6250L places a 29,000 pound water tank.

is visible on the concrete floor. The machines being serviced in the shop are freshly washed and painted.

"We have a maintenance program to make sure our cranes are well taken care of and ready to roll for the next job," she says. "I hate downtime. My employees know that."

Mooncotch readily admits that as a woman, she runs the business a bit different than a man.

"When I became president, I made some changes," she says. "The operators loved it. They were very encouraging to me."

She's proud of the work environment she has created, even if it has a few feminine touches here and there. If an office employee wants to bring his or her pet to work, so be it, whatever makes them the most productive.

Mooncotch is very in tune with her employees and realizes that like the cranes she owns, her employees need to be top-notch to stay competitive. Assuring employees are happy in their jobs and being productive is an important part of her day to day routine.

"I know every aspect of this business, and I solve the problems," she says. "I stay close to our operators. I know that operators can make or break a business. I want to assure we have the best operators out there, that they are well trained, have good quality equipment to work on, that they have the tools they need."

Recently she discovered an operator was



Judith Mooncotch is president of LaGrange Crane Service, based in Hodgkins, IL.

unhappy because the heater in the crane he worked in each day didn't always work properly.

"It's cold in Chicago and our heaters have to work," she says. "It was a little thing, but I need to keep high quality operators. Our guys know I am looking out for them."

As well, she is intent on renting her cranes with operators rather than doing bare rental, which accounts for less than 5 percent of their annual business.

"These cranes are expensive pieces of equipment and our operators know how to operate them safely and in the most productive manner. That's what we focus on," she says.

On any given day LaGrange cranes are out on jobs all over the Chicago area, which is booming with commercial construction. Steel hanging work is the company's "bread and butter," says Rick Garry, LaGrange project estimator and a nephew of Mooncotch.

Garry is anticipating even more opportunity for the company since LaGrange Crane has been officially designated a WBE/DBE enterprise.

"This certification process was difficult but we think we can grow the business as a result," says Garry.

"Rick is young and he sees things in the market I don't always see," says Mooncotch. "If he feels there's a market for a larger crane, then we will get a larger crane and he will go out there get the business."

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Introducing LaGrange Crane's newest edition "A Grove 250 Ton All Terrain Crane"